The Shape of Salvation
Ezekiel 2:1
Mark 2:1-12

February 11, 1973

The Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel was a strange and wild man of God. His book is full of dreams and visions and symbols and odd names. It was Ezekiel who had the vision of the "dry bones": it was Ezekiel who chewed up a scroll and ate it. The entire first chapter of Ezekiel elaborately describes the prophet's first experience with the divine.- in detailed and striking symbolism: a terrible storm, flashing fire, four creatures, a throne above the firmament. And the end of this dramatic experience Ezekiel did what any man might do under the circumstances: he fell on his face. It was an appropriate gesture: it was what men were expected to do in the presence of royalty or divinity. But the voice of God which he heard told him to "stand up" - to act normal - to be himself - so that God could get on with the real reason for the experience - namely, the matter of Ezekiel's future. Ezekiel assumed the traditonal posture of reverence and piety, to be sure. But he didn't stay there long. If he was going to be God's man, it would be on his feet, not groveling in the dust.

It's not too unlike the story I read from the New Testament, another instance of man encountering the divine. Four men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus. Unable to squeeze through the door of the crowded Capernum house they removed a part of the roof and lowered him down through the opening on his pallet. Jesus' reaction is worth considering: "My son, your sins are forgiven", he said. Now, no one had said anything about sin, and no one had asked for forgiveness. The sense of it is - "you're alright: you are OK" to use the currently fashionable idiom: "you are not a prisoner of your past - you are acceptable to God - you are free".

We don't always understand the significance of that because we don't share the view, current in New Testament times, that physical affliction was the result of sin. But his contemporaries knew what he was saying, and in case anyone failed to get the point, he said it another way: "Rise, take up your pallet and ~~walk,~~" + go home

both prone, humble, inactive — now

And so we have Ezekiel and the paralytic ~~m~~n on their feet as a result of an encounter with the divine – ~~a situation not unlike Jonathan Livingston Seagull, who we discussed at some length last week.~~ (* Below) Jonathan, Living Seagull ~~you will recall,~~ was a most remarkable bird. An outcast because he refused to be confined by the boring pursuits of seagulls – eating, sleeping – Jonathan taught himself to fly – really fly – at speeds unheard-of for a seagull. He freed himself from habit and custom and tradition and discovered that he was capable of things no seagull had ever imagined. Near the end of thr book, as Jonathan is instructing other young outcasts in the art of living and flying, a gull with a broken wing presents himself: And a converstaion ensues that is strikingly similar to our Lord's words to the paralytic.

"Help me" said Kirk, wobbling across the sand, dragging his left wing . . "help me" he said in the way the dying speak.

"Come along then" said Jonathan. "Climb with me away from the ground and we'll begin."

"You don't understand. My wing. I can't move my wing."

"You have the freedom to be yourself, your true self here and now."

"Are you saying I can fly?"

"I am saying you are free."

As simply and quickly as that, Kirk Maynard Gull spread his wings and lifted effortlessly into the night air. "

The common theme in those three anecdotes: Ezekiel, the Paralytic and Jonathan Livingston Seagull is that you and I are capable of becoming more than we are: that life can be lived and experienced at a depth that most of us are unwilling to reach. To put it in the ~~lo~~ words of theology, to experience God is to become; to be saved is to begin a process of becoming. Or better yet, in a classic little vignette, ~~XXXXXXX~~ "Being saved is like being pregnant. Something has happened to you, but not everything that's going to." [John Killinger, Alive Now, Winter, 72]

(*) A remarkable little ~~book~~ was published in America last yr. – J.L. Seagull – it became – and still is a sensational best seller: my interest in the book is because it deals with the same situation as our text for this A.M. – Let me tell you just a little bit about it . . .

Ezekiel had to stand up: the paralytic got up and walked: Kirk Gull flew, and the point is that there is somethign inherent in the gospel that ought to be freeing us to stand up and walk and fly: to leave our crutches behind and grow into free, joyful creatures of excellence. To borrow from the words of Jesus in the Gospel According to John: "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly."

But, it doesn't work that way, does it? Ask the man in the street to talk about salvation - orjust about Christian Faith - and more often than not it's going to come out in negative, legalistic terms: a life restricted - confined - rigid - with all the good parts left out. It's going to sound life-denying rather than life- affirming: it;s going to be sefl-debasing rather than self enhancing. In short, it's going to sound like very bad news, which is precisely what a lot of religion is, which is precisley why a lot of thoughtful people conclude that they don't need it.

As a young ~~man~~ boy I was taught some very curious things about salvation - and I expect you share many of them. I had to unlearn them - painfully. ~~I was taught that to be saved I had to have a once-and-for-all, cataclysmic, emotional upheaval; which I could never quite manage.~~ I was taught that to be saved I had to act like other people who were saved - that is, to stop being me and start imitating them, which I tried but gave up because it was so patently ~~phony~~ false. I was taught, furthermore, that to stay saved I had to do a lot of things which were boring and refrain from doing a lot of things which were fun. I figured out the error in that one quite early when I was told that my parents couldn't be saved because they smoked. Finally, I was taught that my salvation hung on my willingness to confess my own rotteness at the drop of a hat: that I was a sinner - which was true: and that God wanted to keep me that way - guilty, suspicious, unhappy with rather normal feelings and emotions - which was not true.

I share that with you, not because I enjoy poking fun at what a lot of people embrace, but because it is so totally and completely alien to the Good News of Jesus Christ: the salvation which is, in fact, "rich and free": the life that can be full and abundant and deep and joyful. And the saddest part off all is that it is marketed under the banner

of New Testament Christianity with a fervor and sefl righteousness that makes us sometimes feel defensive and apologetic about our faith.

Well, what does the Bible say? What is theshape ,of salvation? A quick survey of the ways in which the word is used in the Old Testament shows that God is Savior, and that salvation is from some very real perils and dangers. God saved Israel from the armies of Pharon at the Red Sea. God saves his people from their enemies and oppressors. He saves them from disease and disaster and famine. And while he's saving them he's making them into a nation, a people with t grand and glorious mission to perform in the history of mankind. expand include salvation as wholeness - see TWB see other sects JVS

But then, in the last few centuries before Christ, a new idea crept into the old, rather immediate concept pf salvation. The people had tied their idea of salvation too tightly to the political fortunes of the nation. And when that went badly; when Israel was being defeated and exiled and humiliated by one foreign army after another the emphasis shifted. Men began to despair of salvation ever happeneing within the confines of history - and so they looked elsewhere - if not in this world, then in the next. God would save them in an "other-worldy" sense of the word: after they died, or on the judgement day when they would reap their reward and their enemies would be punished.

It was in this theological climate that Jesus was born and lived and taught. He affirmed what was good in that recent theological development: that is, that salvation is not confined to history alone, nor to an individual's earthly life: that it does have to do with death add beyond. But he also taught that salvation was immediate: that the Kingdom of God was not only future but present: that God's saving love was to be expereenced by his people in the here and now. And through it all, in his words and in the writings of the early church there is a sense of joyful accomplishment. "it has happened: salvation is here: God has saved us: men don't have to do anything but accept the love God has expressed and the new dimension of life he has promised." The New Testament is far more concerned with announcing the joyful good news of salvation, than it is in making people feel badly about themselves, or guilty for their sins: or in bludgeoning people into doing something in order to win a salvation that has already been accomplished.

"Salvation", one scholarly article on the subject observes, "is the ultimate concern of all man's religions." The difference is that while the religions of man provide various schemes for achieving salvation, Christianity proclaims that it has happened. The history of religion is the story of men desparately trying to find the "way" to win a prize which Christianity announces has already been awarded. SO the next time someone hands you a pamphlet listing "the seven steps to heaven", hand it back. Tell him that's been taken care of and the real business at hand is the matter of living and growing and getting into that "abundant life" Jesus prommised.

Again, that is not to deal frivilously with the assurance that God's love for us is not confined to the perimeters of human life. All of us, by reason of our humanity, are caught up in the universal fear of death - our own death, and the death of loved ones. We can hide from it for a while, but one day every man senses that he's going to die, and that sense remains in a special corner of a man's consciousness as long as he lives. It comes to have a power of its own until we feel trapped and enslaved by it. And so to be free, to know that death has no power: that the love of God that called us into being, will surround and protect us through death and beyond is the very best news of all, and the bet freedom of all. That is basic to the shape of salvation.

But there is more. We were created for more than obsession with our own death. We have within each one of us an unquenchable thirst for life. And by that I don't mean simply quantity of life - but quality: fullness, depth, satisfaction, the "abundant Life". Jesus promised. ~~Robert to Escamfira put it this way: "This is what every human being feels in the depth of his soul. This is the longing of every heart - a thirst - for life!" A.N. Fall - 72~~

~~And~~ Dostoevsky, in The Brothers Karamazov, has Ivan say, "I have asked myself many times if there is anything in life that could ever destroy this trememdous, perhaps indecent thirst for life within me. . . I have come to the conclusion that there is not. [Ibid. P 43]

You feel that and so do I. I sensed it recently when I saw a picture of an old man with his pants rolled up past the knee, wading in the surf with a little child. We sense it in moments of boredom, when the every day sameness of life begins to be oppressive. We want to live and to live abundantly - we want to walk - and to fly.

Jesus gave it to men as a gift. He called them to new life - to be more than they were, not by reminding them of their sin, but by loving them, by beleiving in them. He gave men salvation, not by providing a new set of rules, but by demonstrating to them that they were ~~s~~ adriven, that they mattered, that they were important. And they blossomed. His love called a new dimension of living out of them so completely that they could say that he had made them over: [redacted] They became new men, by learning to be simply what they had the potential to be. One writer has put it beautifully: "Actually, Jesus 'unsaves' us from slavishly imitating anyone, including himself. Jesus calls men to be his disciples, not his robots. Being a Christian doesn't mean dressing like Jesus, or being single and a carpenter. It involves being oursleves and caring and sacrificing in our own situation as Jesus did in his."

Jesus saved men from whatever was holding them back, whatever was restricting and inhibiting - by loving them. His love turned fishermen into fearless advocates of his cause, a crippled tent maker named Paul into an eloquat philosopher, a prostitute named Mary into a saint, and many, many common, everday people into joyful, courageous, alive human beings. The shape of salvation for them was as ~~x~~ different as they were from each other. But it happened to them when they sensed his love for them - just as they were.

A paralytic was lowered into the presence of Jesus - a man who couldn't move. And Jesus loved that man enough - not to pity him. Instead he said, "Get up - you're free - free to take responsibility for your own life - free to be the man you want to be." So it can be for you - for me - if we will be open to that kind of love.

Robert Raines, in an article about the healing of the paralytic, imagines Jesus whispering to us. I found his words to be honest and on the mark: and I would conclude

with them:

"Help yourself. Get up and go home. You are free to stop hurting those you love and to start loving those you hurt. You are free to leap instead of lie there. You are free to dance instead of limp. You are free to cry for joy, to laugh through your tears. You are free from the ground up. So get up off the ground and run free, and forgiven. And I'll run with you. Here, take my hands." [A.N., Winter,72,p45]

Amen

Father, we would be free. We would become all that you have created us to become. Open us to the love that can make it happen: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen